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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the influence of researcher race on data analysis and interpretation, sharing four racially diverse researchers' experiences and struggles as they examined the same set of empirical data. The researchers were part of a larger project at the University of Dayton, the Schools Effects Study, which investigated the urban schools from which students exited or entered as a result of a privately-funded scholarship program. Data were collected through systemic observations of mathematics and reading lessons in 3rd and 4th grade classrooms. Researchers recorded the race and gender of each student and teacher during the observation and noted the number and level of questions asked by teachers and the students they called on to answer questions. This determined how often African American and white students were called on and the level of questions they asked. Following the joint observations, the researchers discussed the experience. Differences in their racial backgrounds significantly influenced their reactions to and interpretations of the data collected, with responses ranging from the belief that teachers demonstrated a biased view toward inner city families to the belief that teachers understood the struggles of inner city families. (Contains 22 references.) (SM)

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Different races, different stories: The juxtaposition of researcher reflexivity and race

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Different races, different stories: The juxtaposition of researcher reflexivity and race

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Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of this paper is to explore the influence of the race of the researcher on the analysis and interpretation of data. This is an especially important issue to consider in qualitative research where researcher reflexivity is so pivotal to the analysis of the data. It is important that the researcher realize the influence that personal culture, perceptions and values has on how they interpret what they are told, or what they observe (Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford, 1997). Given the pervasive role of race in our culture (Bell, 1992; hooks, 1994; Sleeter, 1994; West, 1994) it is vital that the researcher constantly reminds himself/herself of the ways in which race can affect perceptions, interpretations, analysis and conclusions. The authors will share their experiences, and the struggles they encountered as racially different members of a research team examining the same set of empirical data.

Theoretical Frame

The theoretical frame of this paper was grounded in two bodies of research and literature, researcher reflexivity and the application of Critical Race Theory to educational research. The researcher's voice in the field (and the search for self and other) has an impact on the truth that is reported (Lincoln, 1997). Personal experiences, culture, values, race and gender influence one's interpretation, and they must be factored into any

research process as forces which shape or structure qualitative analysis (Fine, 1994). In other words, describing the researcher's lens and how it filters the data helps the reader know the researcher as the instrument. One scholar suggests that it is the ethical responsibility of researchers studying people of color to maintain sensitivity to the differences of the population they are studying and to consider how their own racial differences may influence their interpretations of the data collected (Stanfield, 1993).

The different lenses that race brings to the research process are well documented (Aaronsohn et. al., 1995; Au & Kawakami, 1991; Delpit, 1988). This is particularly true when the researcher is familiar with Critical Race Theory (Avery & Walker, 1993; Cochran-Smith, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2000). Critical Race Theory (CRT) and its implications for education are discussed by numerous scholars (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Lynn, 1999; Masuda, 1993; Tate, 1997). Lynn (1999) summarizes some of the purposes of critical race theory identified by various scholars. He identifies some of the purposes of a critical race theory as follows:

1. Recognizes the centrality of race and intransigence of racism in contemporary American society.

2. Rejects East-West European/Modernist claims of neutrality, objectivity , rationality and universality

3. Historicizes its analysis by relying heavily on the experiential knowledge of people of color. (p.608).

If the researcher accepts the validity of the tenets of the theory listed above, that acceptance must have an effect on the perceptions, analyses and conclusions reached by that researcher. For example, a researcher familiar with the idea that race and racism are

omnipotent in our society may view all cross-cultural interactions with some level of expectation that an element of race will be present.

Certain scholars suggest that we apply CRT to educational research (Ladson-Billings ,1998, 2000; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). They propose that CRT can be used as a framework to help identify, analyze, and transform those structural, cultural and interpersonal aspect of education that maintain the marginal position and subordination of African American students (Lynn, 1999, p. 608).

This study proposes to connect CRT to our educational research process in one specific context. The question this study explores is, How did race influence the research process for each member of the research team?

Background of the Study

The study that brought the question of the impact of the lens of race on research and researchers was part of a larger project at the University of Dayton entitled the School Effects Study (SEST). The SEST was designed as a five-year study to investigate schools from which students exit or enter as a result of a privately-funded scholarship program.

We first became involved with the research team in February 1998. The methodology for the study involved multiple research procedures to explore school climate in public and private elementary schools in Dayton, Ohio. All of the schools visited were in an urban setting. The objective of this approach was exploratory. As is usual with ethnographic research, several types of data were gathered. These included: interviews, systematic classroom observations, demographic profiles of the staff and

student bodies of the schools, curriculum, field notes, photographs and miscellaneous documents to support or inform the research.

All four researchers were doctoral students in the educational leadership program at the University of Dayton. Two of the researchers, Cookie and Jeff, currently work in higher education. Jeff is an associate professor, Cookie is an instructor and taught at a public high school for sixteen years before leaving to work in higher education. Reva was a classroom teacher at a middle school in an urban district and Connie was a graduate assistant who has had some prior public and private secondary school teaching experience. Two of the researchers, Cookie and Reva, are African American females, Jeff is a White male, and Connie is a White female. The training sessions were designed to sharpen the judgment skills of the researchers, build consensus and brainstorm possible scenarios that might occur during the classroom observations. Special attention was paid to discussions of situations that might lead to ambiguity on the part of the observer, for example, whether follow-up questions were to be coded separately (and as high or low) and how that information was to be recorded.

The data were collected by the four researchers through systematic observations of mathematics (and some reading) lessons in third and fourth grade classrooms during the month of May 1998. The four researchers spent one full week in May 1998 in the four public and four private schools.

The principal goal of the researchers was to observe fourth grade classes of mathematics. When this goal could not be achieved, other choices were made. Specifically, the second choice for lesson observations of the researchers was to observe fourth grade language arts/reading classes. The third choice would be to observe third

grade mathematics classes, and the fourth choice would be to observe third grade reading or language arts classes.

The selection of the teachers was limited by the criteria of grade level and subject matter. Therefore, the researchers were required to select the classes to be observed from the fourth grade classes available. Teachers consented to being observed and understood that the researchers were observing teacher-student interactions. Teachers were not told that race, gender, and level of questioning were being recorded as researchers observed lessons. When the teachers agreed to being observed, they were informed in writing that their classroom data would be aggregated with observations from other classrooms and other schools and that individual teachers and classrooms would not be identified. They were assured that they were not being individually evaluated. When possible, the researchers observed each teacher more than one time. A total of 46 lessons were observed, taught by 21 teachers in public and private schools. In the public schools, 13 teachers' classes were observed, some more than once, for a total of 27 lessons. Nine of the public school teachers were African American and four were White.

The researchers used a systematic classroom observation process adapted from Sadker and Sadker (1997). The process, originally designed for use in the Sadker's work on gender equity issues, was used to identify each student in the classroom on a chart by location in the room, by race and gender. The race and gender of each student and teacher were recorded by the researchers on site during the observation. Researchers also recorded the number and level of questions asked by the teachers, and identified the student who was called upon by the teacher to answer the question by his or her location on a classroom-seating chart. Using this method the researchers could record the number

of times African American students and White students were called upon, and the level of the questions they were asked (high order or low order).

The researchers participated in three training sessions for classroom observations in which videotapes of classroom lessons were used. The researchers viewed the tapes in specific segments and practiced coding for the identified variables, gender and race of student, location in the classroom, whether the question asked was high or low, volunteer or non-volunteer. After each viewing of the videotapes, reliability coefficients were calculated for the coding results to test for inter-rater reliability[1]. The results were shared and discussed among the research team.

This allowed the team to discuss any areas of disagreement about whether the students were on-task or not, whether the questions asked of each student were high order or low order, volunteer or non-volunteer.

After the video-based training, the researchers observed actual classroom lessons conducted in a fourth grade classroom at a local private elementary school on three occasions. This enabled the team to experience data collection in a real setting. By comparing the coding charts of each researcher it was possible to establish estimates of levels of agreement among raters.

Following the joint observations, the researchers met to debrief and discuss characteristics of high and low order questions. As many variables in the observation experience as possible were identified and discussed. Specific guidelines for determining whether questions would be coded as high or low, what behaviors constituted on-task

[1] The establishment of an acceptable score for inter-rater reliability is typically used to control for deviance in the application of the observer protocol agreed upon among researchers (Krathwohl, 1993).

behavior and whether follow-up questions were to be coded as volunteer or non-volunteer were established, printed and provided for each researcher.

All of these measures were taken to try to make certain that the researchers' methods of data collection and observations were as similar as possible. What was not taken into account was the lens that the different races of the researchers would bring to the interpretation of those observations and data.

During the study we periodically met to discuss the progress of our work at scheduled research meeting. Peer consultation is an important strategy for collecting data because the feedback from colleagues provides opportunities to check one's thinking on the direction of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer consultation meetings were conducted approximately every two weeks. The meetings provided an opportunity not only to examine the direction of the study, but a chance for all SEST members to share their opinions. Sometimes the researchers had different perspectives and reacted differently to the same data.

On one such occasion it became clear that the lens of race needed to be addressed. Jeff, the white male researcher, had brought a quote to share from one of the white teachers he had interviewed. He prefaced his reading of the quote by saying he thought this demonstrated a caring teacher's response to and understanding of the struggles of life in the inner city. The teacher in question—Mrs. Kinsinger[2] had taught for 22 years, nine years at her current school. She was described by many of the staff members, including her principal as an excellent teacher.

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[2] A pseudonym

When Jeff read the transcript of Mrs. Kinsinger's comments, Cookie, one of the black female researchers, immediately responded that the quote was racist. She suggested that it displayed a stereotypical view of the students (almost all black) that Mrs. Kinsinger worked with, and of their parents as well. Specifically it presumed certain things about the parents (that they were on welfare, and did not care about their children because they did not know any better) that the teacher could not possibly know were true.

A lively discussion among the members of the research team ensued. Jeff felt the quote was simply a genuine reaction to the rigors of teaching in the inner city and that it showed some understanding and compassion on the part of the teacher. Cookie felt that the teacher's criticism of the parents was indicative of racial bias and a basic lack of understanding of the reality of the lives of her black students and their parents. Here is the transcript of the quote that sparked the debate:

> Most of the parents are single-parent moms. When you're struggling your focus is not always on your children. Then we have women who would not take a dime of welfare and they work three jobs. Now can you get mad at them because they are trying not to take welfare? And yet their children are tired. Then you have the other side of the coin where you have single moms doing their dating thing, on the welfare rolls and they have expensive clothes. Their focus is different.
>
> You can't fault them for that because that is all they know. They were raised that way. How can you fault a person for not knowing better than they were taught? I don't think that there is an evil spirit in them. But I have to be real honest, there are parents who just don't care.

Interpretation, Speculation, and Questions about Research Practice and Race of the Researcher

The other research team members (besides Cookie and Jeff) had different interpretations of the quote when it was first shared. They ranged from belief that the quote demonstrated an understanding of the struggles of inner city families to the position that it demonstrated a biased point of view. The primary value in the ensuing discussion was not that the team came to agreement about the meaning or the quote, but that we began to realize that we had not paid sufficient attention to the background, experiences and cultural perceptions of the research team members. Furthermore, we had not understood the likelihood that race and culture might have an influence on the interpretation of data. It became obvious that we could each look at the same data and draw different conclusions about what they meant. This led us, then, to pose some questions:

- What impact does the race/ethnicity of the researcher have on data collection and interpretation?
- Should researchers take into account the influence of their own race/ethnicity on the collection and interpretation of data?
- Should other scholars take the race of the primary researcher in to account when attempting to interpret the data collected?

Our experiences demonstrated that the role of the race of the researcher on the interpretation of data must be considered. If, for example, the researcher is an African

American who espouses Critical Race Theory, the first tenet of which is the intransigence of racism in contemporary American society, it is highly likely that he/she will be sensitive to any evidence of that racism in the data collected, particularly when the student sample is predominantly African American and the teacher respondents are predominantly white. A white researcher, who is less familiar with Critical Race Theory, and less embracing of the concept of the ubiquitous nature of racism, might interpret the same data as race neutral.

The race of the individual conducting the research sometimes affects the way the research is analyzed and interpreted. It is important to keep this in mind when collecting and analyzing data, and important for other scholars to keep in mind when they examine the research. Because an open and free discussion of the role of race in education is often difficult to achieve, it is crucial that the impact that the race of the researcher has on the final analysis and conclusions of the research be considered.

The question for the research community is what factors involving race have to be taken into account when the data is analyzed? If that question is ignored is the analysis truly reflective of the perceived reality of the respondents or is it primarily reflective of the perceptions of the researcher as viewed through the lens of race?

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